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Israel: A miracle on the world stage.

“A Jew who does not believe in miracles is not a realist.”

David Ben Gurion

“As he promised, God is raising Israel from the dead.”

Calev Myers

One signpost of the Kingdom of God is the miracle of modern-day Israel. The truth of the Bible is on display there for the world to see. The promises of God to his chosen people are being fulfilled amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life. Before I get into further details on that, let me tell you a bit of my Israel story.

Marianne and I made our first trip to Israel in early 2000. We were part of a tour organized by a friend of mine. I was still new to the Kingdom, and the tour proved to be very confusing to me. Our tour guide was a wonderful Jewish woman who knew the Bible inside out. At each site, she spoke from memory and quote dates and events relative to what we were seeing, including all the relevant Bible verses from the Old and New Testaments. Yet, despite having all this knowledge, she did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. I was totally mystified.

As I read through the Bible multiple times, I began to untangle the story. The Jewish people had largely rejected the good news of the Kingdom. Jesus’ twelve disciples were all Jewish, and so was the apostle, Paul. The first 3,000 believers who responded to Peter’s first sermon were mostly Jewish. However, the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus and the testimony of his disciples about the Kingdom. They began persecuting the believers.

So, the disciples scattered to preach the Gospel elsewhere in the Roman world. The same pattern occurred there. Paul preached the good news first in the synagogues of each city. A few Jews received Jesus, but the majority became antagonistic. Then the good news was shared with the Gentiles, and they responded much more favorably. Sadly, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, and the Jewish people were scattered.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he explains this mystery: *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.* ¹

Because the Jews had hard hearts and refused the message, God opened the Kingdom to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people). The Gentiles will have priority and come into the Kingdom in greater numbers as the Gospel is preached to every nation. During this time of focus on the Gentiles, Jews will largely reject Jesus.

Our tour guide was testimony to this. She had a hard heart toward the message, even though she had a ton of knowledge. This is as God said it would be. A small number of Jews will respond—the hardening was not in full. Today there are about 10,000-15,000 Jewish believers in Israel out of a population of almost 8 million Jews. This lines up with God's promise that he will always preserve a group of Jewish believers.

God also promised that he would bring his people back into the land he had promised to Abraham Isaac and Jacob:

*In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.*²

One day, when the Gentiles have all had a chance to respond to Jesus, God will pour out his grace on the Jews. A tearful repentance will come over Israel for the way they treated Jesus. The entire Jewish nation will finally see their King.

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. ³

Israel has always been a central part of God's plan, but for 2,000 years, the Israelites were scattered all over the world and had no national home. The territory of Israel was renamed Palestine by Emperor Hadrian, using a variation of Philistine intended as an insult. Imagine

¹ Romans 11:25-26, NIV

² Isaiah 11:11-12, NIV

³ Zechariah 12:10, NIV

the amazement when the nation of Israel was suddenly re-established from the wreckage of World War II and the Holocaust. On May 14, 1948, the day the British mandate for Palestine expired, David Ben Gurion declared the establishment and independence of the State of Israel.

The prophet Isaiah had foreseen this day:

Who has ever heard of such things? Who has ever seen things like this?

Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment?

Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children.⁴

Several crucial developments happened to facilitate this sudden rise to nationhood. The dead Hebrew language had been resurrected through the leadership of Eliezer Ben Yehuda. Starting in the late 1800s, Yehuda developed a detailed grammar, invented thousands of new words to update the vocabulary, and began training children throughout the land. It is the only case in world history where a dead language was resurrected and become a country's national language. Hebrew is now spoken by more than 8 million people. The Israeli flag had been designed earlier by one of the earliest Jewish immigrant communities in the land, along with writing and editing of the song "HaTikva" (The Hope), which became the national anthem.

Also, in 1947-48, in desert caves on the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea, thousands of fragments representing about 900 ancient scrolls were discovered. These carefully preserved copies of the books of the Old Testament dated from 300 to 100 BC. They were on average 1,200 years older than the oldest available manuscripts, yet virtually identical in content. This discovery demonstrated that the Bible has been carefully preserved. It proved that all the prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament were authentic, and not alterations by the church. Finally, it gave resounding proof of the historical stake the Jewish people had to the land.

A few hours after David Ben Gurion's declaration, the United States officially recognized the new state. That night, Tel Aviv was bombed by Egypt. The next day, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia declared war on Israel. Miraculously, Israel prevailed. Israel has remained on a war footing continuously. As a result, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are one of the best in the world. The military history of Israel is filled with miraculous victories. God has fulfilled his promises to fight Israel's battles. He has preserved this fledgling nation against all odds, as the Bible declares:

⁴ Isaiah 66:8, NIV

*He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.⁵*

Our second trip to Israel was for a much-needed sabbatical in 2012. During this time, we lived in Jerusalem for three months, a short walk from the Old City. We had the opportunity to worship with Jewish believers and share meals in their homes. We also worshiped and ate with Arab believers, met with a Bedouin family in the desert, talked to several Israeli soldiers, and visited a Druze family in the north. We befriended two Arab Muslims who were our favorite taxi drivers, and we often chatted with them at the Old City's Jaffa Gate. We were able to study the Scriptures with local scholars and travel throughout the land, visiting archaeological sites and learning from several tour guides and historians.⁶

While the existence of Israel is a miracle, it was even more exciting to learn that God is in the process of fulfilling more promises about Israel. Let's just look at a few:

I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.⁷

This is the only place in the Bible where God says he is doing something with all his heart and soul. In 1948 about 800,000 Jews lived in Israel of about 9,500,000 world-wide. In 1970, about 2,500,000 of the 12,300,000 worldwide lived in the nation. Today about 7,700,000 Jews live in Israel out of a global population of 15,500,000. God is faithfully calling and bringing his people back into the land he promised them.

They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them.

*They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;
they will make gardens and eat their fruit.*

*I will plant Israel in their own land,
never again to be uprooted
from the land I have given them,"*

⁵ Psalm 98:3, NIV

⁶ The scope of this book does not permit space to elaborate on the complex history and underlying tensions in the Arab Israeli conflict, but one book that was accessible and well documented is David Brog's *Reclaiming Israel's History*.

⁷ Jeremiah 32:37, 41, NIV

*says the Lord your God.*⁸

Since the 6-day war in 1967 when Israel regained the Golan Heights from Syria, Israelis have rebuilt 33 towns destroyed by previous wars. The entire region is covered with fruit trees and vineyards. Some of the wine being produced there is beginning to win awards in Europe. It is exactly like the prophet Amos foresaw in 700 BC.

In days to come Jacob will take root,

*Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.*⁹

Since 1948, Israel has planted millions of trees. The land looks completely different than it did under the Ottoman and British occupations. Israel is the only country on earth with more trees today than 50 years ago. Even the deserts are being transformed with date and fruit plantations. The Israeli invention of drip irrigation has revolutionized agriculture yields in the land and throughout the world. Israel is literally helping fill the world with fruit!¹⁰

Look at the impact of Jewish scientists and artists on the world scene. Of the 930 Nobel prizes awarded through 2020, 208 were awarded to Jewish laureates. With only 0.2% of the world's population, they have won 22% of the prizes.¹¹ Israeli-developed technology is making a major impact in medicine, cyber-security, navigation, communications, defense, and space exploration, to name just a few.

Israel is a hot bed of innovation. My knee troubles have been substantially reduced because of the Israeli invention of Euflexxa. Israel is a world-leader in the number and quality of tech start-ups per capita.¹² From 2000-2018, Israel was in the top five countries per capita in patents issued. The IDF's search and rescue unit has been deployed to several countries including the US, to help with natural disasters and man-made ones like terrorist attacks.

From the adversity of antisemitism, neighbors bent on her destruction, and the barren state of the land, it is very clear that God has been faithful to his chosen people even if they have

⁸ Amos 9:14-15, NIV

⁹ Isaiah 27:6, NIV

¹⁰ See israel21c.org/70-years-of-israeli-achievement/ and israelbonds.com/News-Events/72-Extraordinary-Israeli-Achievements.aspx

¹¹ aei.org/carpe-diem/looking-back-at-the-remarkable-history-of-the-nobel-prize-from-1901-2020-using-maps-charts-and-tables/

¹² See *Start-Up Nation* by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, 2009.

not been faithful to him. The prophet Ezekiel described what we see in Israel today in a prophecy given 2500 years ago. He described God's plan for what we see today:

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.¹³

God is bringing the Jews back to Israel, even though most do not know him or the Scriptures. When they are all back in the land, the process of bringing them into the Kingdom will begin through repentance, cleansing, new heart, and the Holy Spirit. Then they will finally know him.

God's motive in this is all about his great name—affirming his faithfulness and holiness so that all the nations of the earth will know that he is the King:

Therefore say to the Israelites, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I am proved holy through you before their eyes."¹⁴

Israel is a demonstration project for the love, faithfulness, and holiness of God. Israel is visible proof that God will do what he promises, not because the Israelis are so awesome, but because he is awesome. The things happening in Israel today are his doing, his amazing grace. For us Gentiles, God's faithfulness to Israel is great evidence that he will keep his promises to us.

We returned to Cincinnati and enthusiastically shared what we had learned about Israel with our congregation. Most Americans including most Christians do not know very much about Israel and even less about God's plan for Israel. As our congregation learned more, their faith and love for Jesus grew. One manifestation was generosity to support the Jewish believers who were facing persecution. Another was a strong desire to visit, so in 2014, we started leading tours to Israel. We have led seven tours so far with about 140 making the trip—all our leaders, a few of our mission partners, and a handful of pastor friends. Every single person

¹³ Ezekiel 36:24-27, NIV

¹⁴ Ezekiel 36:22-23, NIV

finds it to be a life-changing trip because they understand Jesus better and they see the scope of the Kingdom in a new light. After getting home, most report that they are reading their Bibles in technicolor, no longer black and white!

We traveled to Israel recently to visit our friends. Life continues to be very challenging. Rockets and terrorist attacks are part of daily life. It is mandatory for every home, office, and hotel to have bomb shelters. Population growth has required building cities in the desert and learning to grow food there. The pandemic has brought disruption and inflation, which combined with the ongoing security challenge of aggressive neighbors has squeezed most families, some into poverty. But God continues to be faithful.

Our friends' congregation there is a beautiful worshiping community. They call Jesus by his Hebrew name Yeshua, which means salvation. The ministry that we partner with to run our tours also serves teenagers and young adults as they go through their mandatory military service. God is nurturing and protecting his little minority and they are blessing their neighbors as witnesses to God's goodness.

Unfortunately, there is growing opposition to Israel around the world. The UN Human Rights Council, from its creation in June 2006 through June 2016, adopted 135 resolutions criticizing countries; 68 out of those 135 resolutions have been against Israel. From 2012 through 2015, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted 97 resolutions criticizing countries; 83 out of those 97 have been against Israel (86%). There were only one or two resolutions against Iran, Myanmar, Syria, China, Russia, and North Korea in the same period.¹⁵

This too is consistent with the Scriptures. All the nations, including longtime allies like the United States, will eventually turn against Israel.

A prophecy: The word of the Lord concerning Israel. The Lord, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the human spirit within a person, declares: "I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness," declares the Lord. "I will keep a watchful eye over Judah, but I will blind

¹⁵ unwatch.org/un-israel-key-statistics/

all the horses of the nations.” Then the clans of Judah will say in their hearts, “The people of Jerusalem are strong, because the Lord Almighty is their God.”¹⁶

Amid all this grace from God, Israel is far from perfect. The nation has had about 1.5 million abortions since 1948, the same number of children they lost in the Holocaust. Their policies on the immigration and marriage of Jews who believe in Jesus have been highly restrictive. There is more trouble ahead for Israel as well, as God’s plan reaches its fulfillment.¹⁷

But we all can learn a lot from the people of Israel. Our trips to Israel have helped me understand the uniqueness of the Hebraic culture, particularly relative to the Hellenistic underpinnings of our life in the West. Take the Hebrew word *Shema*, the first word in the famous daily Jewish prayer. It is translated hear, but also means listen, know, understand, and obey. In the Hellenistic view, we believe we know something after hearing something, reading a book, or seeing a film. In the West, we focus on learning what the teacher knows.

In the Hebraic world, the rabbi’s goal is for you to become like the rabbi. For the rabbi, the apprentice does not really know anything until they routinely live it and put it into practice unconsciously. This unconscious competence is what rabbi Jesus expects of his disciples.

The Hebraic way of life also takes a longer and more communal view. Their family life emphasizes an understanding of family history, respect for the aged, and the Scriptures, which are passed down with deep intentionality. The Western family tends to move more often and can lose its history and long-term perspective.

Finally, the Hebraic culture optimizes the long-term success of the family. In many Western families the goal is to optimize each child, then let them fly. While Hebraic families build long-term together, it can often seem in Western families that each generation is starting from scratch. (I will explore these ideas further in the chapters on family.)

One of the early readers of this book in draft form was Michael Lenhardt, a former business partner in Canada. Michael is a devout Jew who gave me great feedback on this book. He was struck by two things. He did not realize Jesus was a Jew, he thought he was Christian. Part of that is that his Jewish name Yeshua is not broadly used. He also did not realize that all the

¹⁶ Zechariah 12:1-5, NIV

¹⁷ See Zechariah 14:1-2, NIV

early followers of Yeshua were Jewish. When he realized that he could follow Yeshua and retain his Jewish heritage, he was overwhelmed with joy and began following his Messiah.

Despite all odds, the miracle of Israel continues. God is faithful to protect her, despite her unfaithfulness. He has preserved a remnant of Jewish believers. One day, every Jewish person living will see King Yeshua for who he is, and they will come into God's Kingdom.

This is God's plan, spelled out in the Bible and unfolding before us on the global stage. We can play a part in this plan by understanding it, praying for the day to come, speaking to our Jewish friends about the Kingdom, and encouraging them to go to Israel and discover their roots and their amazing future.

Reflection question:

How does God's faithfulness to Israel affect your perception of him?

Practical application:

Have lunch with a Jewish friend or coworker. Ask them about their connection to Israel and their perspective on what is happening there.